

Historian



Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association

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Hours are 9:00 a.m. until 12 noon, Monday to Friday, holidays excluded

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Edited by Jill Nicholson

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Leamington Mennonite Brethren's First Church

By Jill Nicholson

This summer, the Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association received a donation of photographs depicting the building of the original Mennonite Brethren church on Elliott Street in Leamington. They brought an interesting look into the devotion of the members of that church to have a permanent space to worship and highlighted the contributions of the Mennonite Brethren community to the Essex-Kent region and its history.

Heinrich and Nicolai Schmidt and their families were among the first Mennonites to come to the Leamington area from Russia. Heinrich was a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church. To meet the need for spiritual fellowship, the new arrivals of many Mennonite dominations met in private homes for German services without a pastor. Afterwards, pastors, such as Isaac Thiessen from Russia and Jacob Friesen and Jacob H. Janzen from Waterloo and Kitchener, were asked to minister to the growing congregations in rented facilities.

In 1931, members from the Mennonite Brethren and Evangelical Mennonite Brethren groups became affiliated with the Molotschna Mennonite Brethren Church of Kitchener under Isaac Thiessen's leadership.

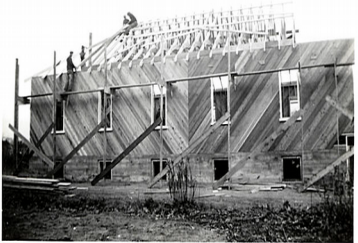
With the increase in Leamington Mennonite membership, the concept of a permanent church came about. The Molotschna Mennonite Brethren church and its affiliated congregations developed a plan to form a conference. Sixteen Leamington Mennonite Brethren members voted on October 2, 1932 to form a separate congregation from the United Mennonite Church. A Mennonite Brethren delegation composed of Isaac Thiessen, Franz Bartel and Heinrich Koop presented

the decision to United Mennonite Elder N. N. Driedger on October 9, 1932 who gracefully received the decision. When the local United Mennonites launched their own building project, the Mennonite Brethren provided a monetary gift and the United Mennonite group did the same for the Mennonite Brethren project.

Over the next seven years, the Mennonite Brethren congregation continued to meet in rented premises. However, with the increase in membership, the need for a permanent building became evident. On June 11, 1939, the membership gave permission to Gerhard Dick, Frank Bartel and Gerhard Willms to purchase property on Elliott Street. The congregation hired contractor J. Thiessen, who, with volunteer labour from church members, finished the building in three months at a cost of \$3,500 in time for the 1939 Christmas Eve celebration. An addition was built in 1958. The Elliott Street location was sold and a new church building on Talbot Street East in Leamington was built in 1965 with expansions in 1979 and 2003. ■



Mennonite Brethren Church Photos



A Five Generational Search for the “Promised Land” by Ken Enns

It has been a long journey for five generations of the Enns family, a farming family that has found its way to Essex County. The journey has taken them half way around the globe, through many countries, many trials and hardships to find and live in one of the most productive and prosperous farming communities in the world, Essex County.

The journey started in Poland, at that time called Prussia, in the early 1800s. Their religious beliefs were different than those of the majority and those of the government at that time and that resulted in them being branded as heretics. The resulting persecution caused them to flee for their lives. Catherine the Great, the Czarina of Russia, heard of their plight and, because of their good knowledge of farming, invited them to come to the vast grassland prairies of southern Russia, hoping to develop that enormous expanse of unproductive land. She promised them land to farm and freedom of religion in exchange. The early settlers took shelter in not much more than a hole in the ground, covered by branches during those bitterly cold winters. The land was rich, sometimes said to have twelve feet of top soil. They gradually brought in seed varieties of wheat, fruit trees and vegetables, along with breeding cattle and horses from around the world. In time, they built homes, barns, machine shops, schools and hospitals. Life prospered. They did not see the storm clouds building. They did not foresee the destruction that was about to befall them. Everything they knew and had worked for would be gone.

My great grandfather, Peter Enns, was one of the benefactors of those early trials and tribulations. He was born into a family that had already begun to prosper. It was prior to World War I. They had bought one of the first automobiles to come into the area, a German Opel. Life was peaceful and idyllic. About that time, Czar Nicolas of Russian, entered the war against Germany. Farms lost their labourers to the army. Grain and horses were confiscated for the war effort. The peasant population was starving and becoming angry and resentful against anyone who owned anything, had any kind of education or was in a position of authority.

Their village of Schoenfeld (translated “beautiful field”) was one of the first villages to be burned to the ground. Roving bands of bandits raped, murdered and burned anything in their path. Today, one can travel to that area of Russia and see a monument to that “glorious” leader

of the Revolution, the leader of those roving bands. The White and opposing Red armies fought back and forth on the front that moved over the area. With great-grandfather Peter dead, great-grandmother, together with her children, including my young grandfather Henry, fled to another village. They were taken in by grandfather Henry’s in-laws and lived in a broken-down house at the rear of the farm. For three years, they lived in fear while those roving bands and armies moved back and forth, taking everything, including the seed for the next year’s planting. Starvation set in. Through the work and energy of a few tireless men, arrangements were made to bring these now refugees to America. The now powerful Communist government of Russia didn’t want to let them go. Did America even want them? Thankfully, the Canadian Pacific Railroad lent them the money to pay their way to North America. The money was to be paid back as soon as they were able, and thus, they, along with a number of fellow refugees, found their way to Essex County and other parts of North America.

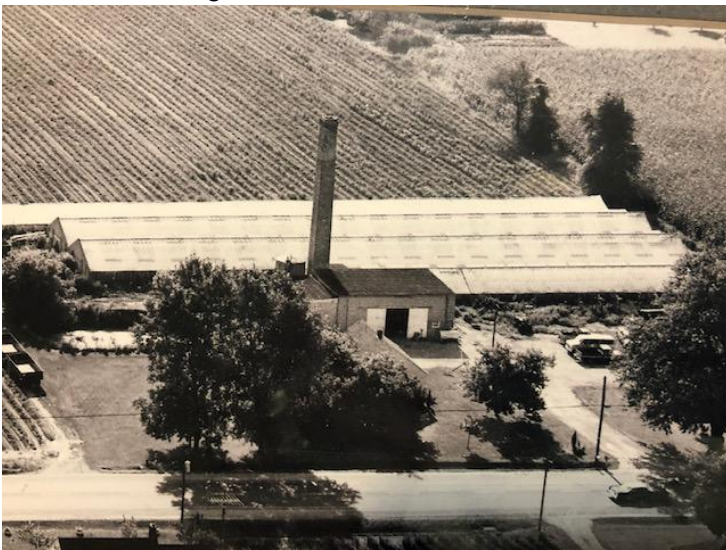


1950, Ken’s father Peter working in the first small greenhouse, planting seedlings for later transplanting to the field in early spring.

(Continued on next page)

A Five Generational Search for the “Promised Land” Continued

Grandfather Henry came to Essex County in 1924 with a young family of seven children, including my father Peter who was seventeen at the time. They took on a share crop arrangement with a local farmer by the name of Sydney Leslie in the Graham Sideroad area. They grew tobacco and tomatoes. Those years were wet, the land poorly drained and the resulting harvest very poor. They then took on a share crop near Wheatley which also turned into disaster as the tobacco crop there suffered a devastating root rot. In 1928, my dad Peter and brothers all took on jobs to earn enough money to feed the family. In 1929, the family bought a 100 acre clay loam farm on Concession C from an Arthur Poulter where they grew tomatoes and pickles for the Heinz company. In 1930, depression hit and everything around them seemed to crash. Prices were poor, but the family was very happy to be here together in Canada. 1934 was a very dry year and the untilled clay soil produced a very poor crop. My father Peter married Susanna Koop in that year and the families struggled on through a flooding year in 1935. By now the families realized that early vegetable crops needed to be grown on the rich and better drained sandy soils of Essex County. Grandfather Henry moved to the farm of Francis Gregory on the 10th concession of Mersea Township and my father Peter with his new bride began share cropping on the 4th Concession and eventually bought a 10 acre early vegetable farm on Highway 77 north of Leamington.



1975, first purchase in a continuing greenhouse expansion.

77 Highway is where I, Ken, grew up. I followed my father Peter like a shadow around the farm and he and Mom grew early vegetables, tomatoes, potatoes and burley tobacco. It was a small farm and Dad had to take on winter jobs in the factories to make ends meet. In 1958, a small greenhouse was built and that started us in a new direction which eventually led to almost 40 acres of greenhouse vegetables today. In 1962, Dad passed away as a result of a heart attack, and at the age of 56, he left wife Susie, Ken and 12 year old twin brothers Dennis and Dave alone to pay a mortgage and to keep the farm going. I had no intentions of becoming a farmer. I loved school and learning, and made an effort to continue my education by attending half days in Grade 13 at Leamington High and through correspondence completing my Grade 13 education. University of Windsor offered me a scholarship to enter the mechanical engineering department at the university, but with great sadness, the offer was turned down and my lot as a farmer was sealed. In 1964, I married Rita Konrad, a farm girl from the 8th concession of Mersea Township. After a short honeymoon, the two of us took up spades and dug up the greenhouses for steaming. This was to be the welcoming into the next 50 years of married life. Farming was difficult. There was never any money. Everything went into paying the mortgage. In 1968, we bought another half acre greenhouse across the highway from Steve Wilhelm. We farmed the two farms until 1973 when younger brother Dave came home and joined the farm operation. Dave married Linda Flaming in 1974 and the four of us worked in a corporate structure until 1996. During those years, the greenhouse operation was enlarged as finances permitted and in 1996 Ken and Dave separated to continue farming with each of their sons Steve and Phil. In 1997, Ken and Steve withdrew from growing field crops to concentrate on expanding the greenhouse side of the farming operation. In 2007, a new and modern 25 acre glass greenhouse facility was added to the operation. It brought the acreage of greenhouses to 37 acres and entered the family into a new phase of computers and science in the business of agriculture. Essex County has become the home of the greenhouse industry of over 2,000 acres. It is a world class industry and we are thankful to be a small part of its success. Thank-you to Essex County for being our “Promised Land” ■

Harvest in West Prussia by Hildegard Fiss

Before combines and tomato harvesters, even before tractors, human and horsepower completed the harvest. It was during this time that I grew up on a 64-hectare farm in West Prussia. Much of the farm was used for pasture and clover. The remainder was planted in barley, oats, rye, wheat, beets and sugarbeets.

Seasonal workers were hired to assist with the harvest. A binder pulled by two horses cut the grain stalks and tied them into sheaves. Six to eight pairs of these sheaves were stacked together into a "Hocke". With Hocke after Hocke set up in straight rows, the fields were a beautiful sight. A big rake pulled by a horse raked up the loose stuff left behind. Our wheat was mainly stored in the huge barn, to be threshed during the winter months. The other varieties of grain were threshed outside. Three wagons each pulled by four horses were needed to supply the threshing machine with sheaves.



Harvesting Wheat in Russia by Henry Pauls
Conrad Grebel University College

On the fields, two men pitched the sheaves up onto the wagon where two women piled them high. We four children were expected to help as well. Our first job was to bring coffee break out to the field. Everyone walked barefoot during the summer and it was a challenge to walk over the stubble. The next job was "weiterrucken" - or move along. We had to drive the wagons from one Hocke to the next. Of course, only when the driver called to move forward and we had to stop exactly when he called halt! On hot, humid days, the flies were always bad in the grain field, and the horses often had a mind of their own. This was not the easiest job. As I got older, I was allowed to drive the big rake. That was a lot more fun. The best job by far was to work on the thresher. It was very dusty and strenuous, but one always felt in charge, and I liked that!

The harvest was weeks and weeks of hard work for man and beast. But then came the last load! High on top, on a pitchfork was the harvest wreath. It was made by the women workers and contained all four types of grain. Decorated with flowers and ribbons it was a beautiful sight! The wreath was presented to my father who then thanked the workers for their faithful service during the harvest. An invitation was then extended for a harvest meal. The wreath was hung in the entrance of our home where it remained until the following year.



Oak Street Leaves October 2000

UMEI'S 75th Anniversary

2020 marks the 75th anniversary of UMEI, although the COVID-19 pandemic cancelled the events scheduled after mid-March. Today's UMEI Christian High School plays an important role in the life of Mennonites in the Leamington area. It is the community hub where cultural, church and educational pursuits have been held.

The beginnings of UMEI started at the end of World War II. A change in high school curriculum in the public schools to promote patriotism and compulsory cadet training program for boys prompted Mennonite parents to pursue an alternative education system that represented their values and provided a background for overseas mission work. The majority of the families were United Mennonites who came to Canada in the 1920s so they had the resources and numbers to seriously consider establishing a high school. Mennonite students could request alternative service, but pressure to participate in the cadet program was strong.

At first Bible courses were taught at the Leamington United Mennonite Church in the 1930s. In 1945, it was decided to add some high school courses to the curriculum. Jacob A. Dyck and John C. Neufeld taught the courses in the Leamington United Mennonite Church basement, with an attendance of twenty-five students in Grades 9 and 10. Grade 11 was added in 1946 and Grade 12 in 1947.

The decision to build a high school in the Leamington area was decided by conversations amongst all the United Mennonite Churches in Ontario. Leamington was chosen due to the size and potential future growth of the Mennonite Community in Essex County. After a variety of sites had been considered, in 1946, a building was constructed on the 6th concession of Mersea Township to house the United Mennonite Bible School. The original building was 100 feet by 40 feet and included four classes and a principal's room and a teacher's room. The kitchen, cold room and washrooms were located in the basement. The upper storey was designated as the dormitory for out-of-town students who would come from the other catchment church regions. Much of the construction was done by volunteer labour which helped keep costs low.

Classes began there in January 1947. There were 78 students and 10 Grade 12 graduates in the 1947-1948 school year.

By Jill Nicholson

The school changed its name to the United Mennonite Educational Institute in 1948. As enrollment increased, an auditorium and gymnasium were added in 1950-51. During these years, Grade 13 was added but was quickly discontinued after two years as it was too expensive to continue.

A highlight for UMEI was accommodating meetings for delegates to the Canadian Mennonite Conference which was hosted by the Leamington United Mennonite Church in July 1951.

Enrollment remained fairly constant in the 1960s. The number of students from Niagara did not really materialize, especially after Eden Christian College was established in St. Catharines. The dormitory was finally closed in 1970.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, enrollment declined due to poor economic times, so a campaign was launched to attract Mennonite and non-Mennonite students to the school. Despite the influx of other Christian students, the numbers were still low due to the lack of academic specializations. By 1995, 40% of the students came from non-Mennonite backgrounds. To more accurately represent the make-up of the school, the name of the school was changed to UMEI Christian High School in 2006.

To date, over 1400 students have graduated from UMEI. They left with the tools to become 'problem solvers' and to contribute to their communities. They have gone to work in a variety of professions such as teaching, architecture, agriculture and to participate in mission work throughout the world.

Congratulations to UMEI Christian High School for its first seventy-five years of success ■



Our Tomatoes Were Thirsty by Jake N. Driedger

My dad sharecropped a small farm near the village of Ruthven in the mid-1930s. Dad's bread and butter crop was five acres of Heinz tomatoes. While Dad's name was on the contract, all eight of us were involved in producing the crop. Since my grandmother was arthritic, my main job was to babysit her while the others were doing field work. Tomato harvest, as you know, extends well into autumn, so I didn't begin school until I was a full seven years of age.

Unfortunately for us, dad had an off-farm job that paid little and demanded a lot. He was the minister in an area church, and when he was away on church business, the rest of us did our best to nurture the crops.

That summer, nature dealt us a dirty blow – dry winds and no moisture. As the tomato plants became smaller and smaller. Dad's usually strong faith took a similar turn. One morning, dad solemnly announced that for the next few days we would be watering the tomatoes and everyone would take part. Grandmother's part was to fend for herself in the house without complaining. The irrigation project began with Dad hitching the horses to the flattrack, on which he hoisted some wooden barrels. Next, he drove as close as possible to the farm well and, with rope and pail, began drawing water. The rest of us formed a line between the well and the wagon, and then slowly pail by pail we filled the barrels. That finished, we proceeded to the tomato field, where by teamwork we gave a water shot to each thirsty plant.

When the last plant had been satisfied several days later, Dad, not usually given to gaiety, pronounced a celebration and without further words got into our sickly Chevie and drove to the Scratch General Store in Ruthven. He returned with a smile on his face and a cherry pop in his hand. Mom, as always, immediately recognized the dilemma, how one cherry pop could satisfy so many. She quickly gathered us around and gave us a puritan lecture on the evils of drink. She concluded with a profound suggestion – dilution. We all agreed and all thirsts were quenched. There was even some left over for grandmother. What's more, it is still the best pop of any kind I've ever tasted. Our tonnage of tomatoes that fall was minimal, but we survived the winter without government assistance. ■

Oak Street Leaves March 1995

Essex-Kent Mennonite Community and COVID-19

The world-wide coronavirus pandemic has had a major impact on the members of the Essex-Kent Mennonite community. Over the past several months, there are been stories of resilience, adaptability and kindness.

The Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association has begun to collect the COVID-19 stories which reflect the experiences of the Mennonite people and institutions in our area. We are asking the community to send us any story, photograph, video or any other format which documents the Essex – Kent Mennonite coronavirus experience.

Please send any documentation to Jill Nicholson, Curator at info@ekmha.ca

If you are interested in engaging in the broader view of the Mennonite experience, visit the Anabaptist History Today project on COVID-19. It is a collaboration of sixteen North American Anabaptist archives and museums and is the first large-scale, collaborative digital project of its kind in the Anabaptist community. ■
Go to this link:
<https://aht.libraryhost.com/s/archive/page/Welcome>

Can You Help Us?

The Essex-Kent Mennonite Historical Association is looking for volunteers to assist with various aspects of our operations. If you have expertise in digitization or data entry, we need you! We will work with your schedule to accommodate when you are available. Students who need community service hours are also welcome.

We are also looking for community members who want to share their interests for future programs when times allow. If you are an avid traveller, consider presenting a travelogue. If you can demonstrate a skill of our Mennonite ancestors or have a family story to tell, contact us. As we have learned from our pandemic isolation, connecting with others is important. ■

If you wish to share your skills with us, please contact Jill Nicholson, Curator – info@ekmha.ca

Nich dit...Nich daut

Enjoying this newsletter? Help make the next one even better! Send submissions to info@ekmha.ca

Upcoming activities at the Heritage Centre

- All programs are currently postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Tours can be pre-booked by emailing or calling the Centre.
- Research queries are still welcome.
- Call 519-322-0456, email info@ekmha.ca or check our Facebook page for updates.

Support Essex-Kent Mennonite history! Become a member of EKMHA or renew today.

Your support helps EKMHA continue its mission of preserving the histories of the Mennonites of Essex and Kent Counties. Membership costs only **\$15/year** for an individual, church, organization, or business. Visit www.ekmha.ca/membership to join online or fill out and return the form below ■

Name: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____ Phone: _____

Membership Fee (\$15 per person/group) \$ _____ Donation to Heritage Centre (Optional) \$ _____

Would you like to receive email about EKMHA news and events? Yes please No thank you

Are you interested in volunteering 1 hour/month or more? Yes, send me info No thank you

Please make cheques payable to EKMHA and deliver or mail to:

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Leamington, ON N8H 4T5

Tax receipts will be issued for donations and memberships
www.ekmha.ca | info@ekmha.ca



Tomato Harvest – Enns Farm